The Fourth Church Pulpit

WHOSE FAMILY VALUES?

May 8, 1994

John M. Buchanan

FOURTH
PRESBY
TERIAN
CHURCH
A LIGHT IN THE CITY

126 East Chestnut St. Chicago, IL 60611-2094
Phone: 312.787.4570
John M. Buchanan, Pastor

Scripture : John 1:5-6, Matthew 10:34-39

"I have come to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in- law." Matthew 10:35 (NRSV)

I have a new hero. He is a professional athlete but his name is not one most of us recognize. He doesn't play for the Bulls, Cubs, Sox, Bears or Black Hawks, and what he did that caused me to adopt him as my hero didn't even happen on the playing field. In fact, he's my hero for something he did not do. His name is David Williams, a football player. He is an offensive lineman for the Houston Oilers and he's my hero because he did not play in a game between the Oilers and the New England Patriots last October 17. And the reason he didn't play was that his wife had a baby, their first, on the night of the 16th, and he decided that it was more important that he be present at the birth of his child than playing a game. The Houston Oilers, on the other hand, didn't see things that way and I can understand their point of view too. They docked Williams' salary $111,000 which is what they judged his presence on the football field to be worth. And while that's a hefty amount, there are fifteen other games and I don't think Mr. Williams suffered economic hardship. But he does have his priorities right.

It happened again last week. Country singer Garth Brooks witnessed the birth of his second child rather than attend the Academy of Country Music Awards ceremony where he was named Country Music Entertainer Of The Year. He could be my hero too, but I don't know much about him and I like football more than I like country music. But he did get his priorities straight last Tuesday night.

Jay Leno cracked, "If Garth thinks being with his wife when she's having a baby is more important than a piece of plastic and metal, I don't know where his values are."

Whose Family Values? is what I've called this sermon for what the church calendars try to call the Sixth Sunday f Easter, or the Festival of the Christian Home, or Family Sunday. But we all know what Sunday it really is . . . the one that prompts people to sidle up to the minister the week before and say things like, "I'm bringing my mother to church next Sunday, so it better be good."

The trouble is that it's not easy to find nice things about families in the Bible to preach on. The Bible, in fact, is quite realistic about family. The first, primal family is a disaster, or dysfunctional as we have learned to say it. Adam and Eve are so co-dependent and addicted to approval that they end up contributing to one another's moral downfall. Outside paradise they have two sons, one of whom murders the other. Noah is discovered naked, in a drunken stupor by his sons, one of whom he curses. Abraham loans his wife Sarah to Pharaoh for a while to save his own skin. Jacob deceives his blind father, defrauds his brother, and his sons leave their brother, Joseph, Jacob's favorite, to die in the desert. David commits adultery and arranges the murder of Uriah to cover his tracks. His own children are guilty of incest and betrayal, and his friend and commander-in-chief, assassinates David's beloved son, Absalom, who is leading an insurrection against his father. The Bible does not romanticize or idealize the family.

The only thing we know about Jesus' family life is a single incident when he was twelve, when he disobeyed his parents, left them during a trip to Jerusalem and made them crazy with worry.

And then, when he began to preach and teach, he launches what seems to be a persistent, strange attack on the institution of the family. What's that all about?

It helps to know that there is no word in the ancient language for the family we know — two parents and their children. Rather the word family meant "household" and included three generations of blood relatives; grandparents, parents, children, as well as a number of others: servants, slaves, household workers. The Romans, in hose culture the Christian church began, defined family as everybody who lived under the authority of a pater ilias, father of the household. Interestingly, in Rome, his wife was not under his authority but remained part of her father's household officially. That meant responsibility for and authority over children residing with the father, although the mother supervised their daily care. It was the father who decided whether a newborn infant would be kept or simply discarded; "exposed" was the name for it.

In its absolute male dominance and social rigidity, the ancient family was society in miniature, Professor John Dominick Crossan says. It was hierarchical, absolutely fixed. The structure of the family controlled who a man or woman was and would be, or could be, for as long as they lived.

Jesus, on the other hand, came proclaiming the Kingdom of God. He said it was present in the life of the world. In stark contrast to society and its basic family structure God's Kingdom, he said, was characterized by openness, inclusiveness and a radical egalitarianism. All were welcome. All were equal in God's sight — social outcasts, lepers, women, children, gentiles, pagans, old people. "The patriarchal chauvinism of the day was negated by Jesus in favor of blessedness open to anyone who wanted it, without distinction," Professor Crossan observes.

Jesus was not anti-family. He urged his disciples to obey the commandment about honoring parents, he blessed the children, and in his own behavior, he cared about and provided for the continuing care of his mother.

But one day, when he was preaching and arguing with the scribes, his mother and brothers and sisters came for him, to take him home and he said something that sounds almost cruel.

> "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." [Mark 3:33, 35]

He was saying that God's Kingdom frees men and women from all that restricts and oppresses, even sometimes their own families. It has taken many centuries but we know now that sometimes families are oppressive and restrictive. In our text this morning, he suggests that he will divide families along generational lines and sometimes that is exactly what happens. Sometimes families have to be understood clearly — sometimes broken apart for life to happen.

Did you see the Jules Feiffer cartoon last week? One of those painful satires that feels to me like running fingernails across a blackboard. An older and younger woman, mother and daughter, are talking. The daughter says,

> "When I was little and got in trouble, you always took the other side. . . . When I won prizes in sports you told me I look too muscular. . . . When I got engaged you told him I'd be a lousy mother. . . . When he walked out on me seven months later, you told me I provoked it. . . . Ma, just once can't you be there for me?"

The older woman, who has been glaring, finally speaks.

> "You make me wait forty years to hear this?" and then with angry tears. . . "And I thought I could trust you."

Whose family values? When we talk about the topic there is, it seems to me, only one point on which everybody agrees and that is that the modern family is broken. Regardless of whatever it was in the past, it isn't working very well today. I was reading a book on images of the church recently and the author suggested that we ought to stop calling the church a family — everybody's favorite church metaphor — "the Presbyterian family" — because most people's experience of family is of dysfunction, pain, guilt, anger.

The late Margaret Mead located the problem, namely the nuclear family; two parents and their children, living far away from their relatives. It didn't even exist in the ancient world. There is no word for it in ancient language. The nuclear family, she said, is a modern invention and not a particularly good one. Cornel West, speaking at Rockefeller Chapel recently about his experience in the African-American Christian Church, commented that we are having a crisis in this country in all "the contexts of nurture." Nobody is tending the children. Everybody has abandoned them. Two parent families, on their own, have never worked, he said. When you see a nuclear family that looks like it's working, you can count on the fact that there are others, probably lots of others involved: grandparents — who are the real moral models — aunts, uncles, almost surely a church full of surrogate aunts and uncles and grandparents.

"Without Deacon Jones and my basketball coach and my Sunday School teachers, in addition to two good parents, I wouldn't be where I am today," said Dr. Cornel West, Department head at Princeton University.

There are particular challenges today. One of them is economic. Ellen Goodman's editorial in the *Tribune* last Tuesday was on the mark.

> "Everybody knows it takes two incomes to maintain a middle-class life style," so Goodman proposes three parent families. "The arrangement would allow one parent to be between jobs at any time without forcing the whole family to face foreclosure." She claimed theological justification. "If God had meant babies to have only two parents, would he have made it a three shift job? If there were three," she reasoned, "one could be the designated driver, worrier, and emergency back-up system."

She declined to say what would happen at bedtime but allowed as how she might have to revise her plan and have four parent families.

The Atlantic Monthly published a feature length article by Barbara DeFoe Whitehead last April with the eye-catching title, "Dan Quayle Was Right" in which the author suggests that while the Republican party was wrong to use the issue in the way it did by appearing to be attacking single mothers, and the use of one of television's most popular stars and shows was a colossal blunder; the vice-president was essentially right in raising the issue. Now let it be said that there are many single mothers doing a magnificent and loving and devoted job of parenting. And there are couples who are selfish, greedy, cruel and abusive. The fact remains that children with single parents are six times more likely to be poor and in trouble physically and emotionally than children with two parents. It is largely economic. Television glamorized Murphy Brown. The fact is that only one tenth of one percent of single mothers look like Murphy Brown: glamorous, single women with incomes over $50,000 per year. In a scholarly article in *The Christian Century* Vanderbilt political scientist Jean Bethke Elshtain comes to the point bluntly:

> "To mutter nostrums about 'choice' and 'independence' to a fourteen-year-old crack addicted, undereducated pregnant girl living in a disintegrating and violent neighborhood is both cruel and contemptuous, although it is sometimes regarded as the liberal thing to do."
> [*The Christian Century*, July 14, 1993]

Neither liberal nor conservative solutions are working. We have helped create a system that seems to excuse everyone, but particularly men from responsibility. Popular alternatives would punish the children for the failure of their parents, and fill the jails with absentee fathers.

What we need is an honest discussion, a public conversation about some assumptions we made a few years ago. For instance, those of us in helping professions knew the pain and destructiveness which occurred when terribly unhappy parents stayed together for the sake of the children, the family. That wasn't good, we said, because we meant it and it is true, that children sometimes suffer more in families when parents are always fighting, than they do when parents separate and divorce. And so an assumption shifted. Kids, we assumed, could cope with separation of parents easily. Well, they don't cope easily. They suffer a lot. They are affected and they need a lot of support.

We need to stop the silliness about divorce. Of course it is a better option than continued and destructive conflict. Every minister, counselor, psychiatrist I know has advised and stood with clients whose choice to be divorced was strong and good and liberating. But it is not simple and easy and without ramifications. Barbara DeFoe Whitehead takes the Hallmark Card Company to task for a greeting card that celebrates divorce as a liberation a little too flippantly.

> "Think of your former marriage as a record album. It was full of music — both happy and sad. But what is important now is — You! the recently released hot new single! You're going to the top of the charts."

We need to stop the silliness . . . the trivialization of the whole topic by the media, by television, by Hollywood.

Is there anything to be done other than acknowledging our problems and lamenting our public poverty of healthy family models? Can we have public conversation about family that does not drift to ideological extremes of left or right, that acknowledges that things are different, that about half of us are divorced, many are remarried, many are single: that single women have children and will continue to do so as a matter of choice and that it is often and can be a good and moral choice? Can we have public conversation about ways institutions like churches and governments can address this fragile and vulnerable dimension of our common life?

Can we not at least acknowledge that the old idea that marriage is a covenant and not simply an arrangement has merit because the whole community has a stake in it: that the children sooner or later belong to all of us?

Can we not, in the name of families, continue to insist that our streets and schools and neighborhoods be safe once again and that the place to begin is sensible gun control? Can we not, at least, make it very difficult for an impulsive, brash adolescent to get his hands on a deadly weapon? Can we not address the incredible fact that 5,356 American youngsters and children died last year from firearms?

Can we not insist that television reflect something other than violent solutions to all life's dilemmas? Can we not as church people advocate individually and together for government programs that support families, that reward hard work, that encourage poor couples to stay together, to work and to tend to their children, that treat with compassion and steadiness the ones whose needs are urgent?

Can we not support, individually and as a church, the single parents whose challenge is so great?

Perhaps it begins for each of us in our hearts — as we acknowledge that it was in a family that we were nurtured, that we learned much of what we know about grace, community, about the possibilities and the dangers of life together in intimacy: that it was in a family that we learned most of what we know about loving and being loved . . . about forgiveness, and acceptance, about failing and getting up and trying again. It was in a family that we learned about unconditional love, perhaps indirectly, perhaps painfully because it was not unconditional but, perhaps wonderfully and openly.

And so perhaps the public conversation begins with each of us as we give thanks for our family, whatever it was, as we accept and forgive our parents, and make peace with our parents whether they are alive or gone. Someone said we become fully adult when we can forgive our parents.

And then as we learn to tell one another about our love, as we say "I love you" to them, often, and if we never got around to it earlier, we start making up for lost time today.

And as we acknowledge that this is a very important matter, by actually doing something about the family crisis in our culture: vote, write letters, donate money, volunteer time, tutor, teach, care for a child, become an outspoken advocate for this most basic and precious of human institutions.

My friend Joanna Adams, pastor of Trinity Presbyterian Church, Atlanta, tells a story that I'd like to borrow as a conclusion. It's a southern story and not an urban setting, and she could tell it much better than I. It's about the day the children of Trinity Church got lost. There was some children's event at the church. Lots of children were there and the time came for their parents to pick them up. They drove around the building, around to the back; no children anywhere. They came into the building; no children. They became a little uneasy. Turns out all the children were sitting up in a big magnolia tree in the center of the circle in the driveway, watching and waiting for their parents to come; waiting for them to find them: hoping they would find them.

Joanna says she wonders if the children are not watching and waiting to see if we're going to raise them right. And I think that's exactly where to end this — with the children watching and waiting to see if we're going to figure out how to be families again.